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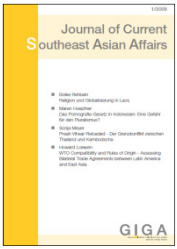

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Triple Duel: The Impact of Coalition Fragmentation and Three-Corner Fights on the 2018 Malaysian Election

Kai Ostwald, Paul Schuler, and Jie Ming Chong

Abstract: Malaysia's previously hegemonic Barisan Nasional (BN) government was unexpectedly defeated in the 2018 general election despite a fragmented opposition and widespread three-corner fights that theory states should inhibit turnover. Why? We argue that the opposition-split hypothesis rests on three core assumptions: third parties split only the anti-incumbent vote; coalition/party support is relatively uniform across the country; and opposition parties are not "elite splits" in disguise. The Malaysian context challenges all three of these assumptions. Counterfactual election simulations ultimately suggest that the opposition split neither dramatically helped nor hurt the BN. While this does not upend conventional wisdom on opposition coordination, it does demonstrate that the theory manifests only when its assumptions accord with local realities. More substantively, our analysis also provides insights into why the new opposition will likely seek to increase the salience of ethno-religious issues in a bid to recapture electoral ground.

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Keywords: Malaysia, opposition fragmentation, opposition coordination, elections, democratization, coalitions, ethnic politics, Political Islam, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Pakatan Harapan, Barisan Nasional

Kai Ostwald is an assistant professor at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, and the Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia.
E-mail: <kai.ostwald@ubc.ca>

Paul Schuler is an assistant professor at the School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona.
E-mail: <pschuler@email.arizona.edu>

Jie Ming CHONG is a PhD student at the School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona.
E-mail: <chongjieming@email.arizona.edu>

1 Introduction

Malaysia's ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition entered the 2018 general election fully confident of extending its grip on power, as coalitions led by the hegemonic United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had dominated Malaysia's politics since the country's independence in 1957 by winning each of the 13 previous general elections.[1] The BN's confidence was bolstered by the dissolution of the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition coalition, through which the ideologically dissimilar opposition parties had coordinated efforts in the previous two elections. While a new coalition – Pakatan Harapan (PH) – was created in its place, it did not include the crucial Islamist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Instead, with tacit support from the BN, PAS contested the election independently as a third party. This created three-corner contests throughout Malaysia that both BN and most observers assumed would split the anti-incumbent vote, thereby helping to preserve the BN's rule.

This expectation was consistent with theoretical work on electoral authoritarian regimes, which contends that a fragmented opposition significantly impedes efforts to unseat a hegemonic regime (Donno 2013; Magaloni 2006). Hence, such regimes may attempt to co-opt segments of the opposition in an effort to inhibit coordination and raise the threshold required to defeat them (Gandhi 2008; Gerschewski 2013). As Ong notes, the age-old strategy of dividing to rule is "one of the surest techniques of entrenching dominance" (2016: 186). We refer to this as the "opposition-split hypothesis." And yet, despite a newly fragmented opposition and other far-reaching advantages, the BN was forced to concede defeat, thereby bringing an end to one of the world's longest-ruling elected regimes. The result is even more confounding because the BN's win in the 2013 general election (GE13) came against a highly coordinated opposition.

Does Malaysia's fourteenth general election (GE14) challenge the conventional wisdom on opposition coordination in electoral authoritarian regimes? This article examines the role of opposition coordination and three-corner fights in the BN's unanticipated electoral defeat, as well as the implications of the turnover for future inter-party coordination in Malaysian politics. Without question, some elements of the election follow theoretical expectations. As conventional wisdom assumes, UMNO likely

1 The 11 states of the Malay Peninsula became independent as Malaya in 1957. Merger with the territories of Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore in 1963 created the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore left the federation in 1965, leaving the current 13-state configuration.

facilitated – if not outright orchestrated – the fragmentation of PR and PAS's subsequent decision to contest the election as a third party. PAS ultimately ran as a third party in 70 per cent of districts and captured 17 per cent of the popular vote. While the prevailing expectation was that this would divide the anti-incumbent vote, the ratio of BN to PH votes in GE14 actually *decreased* in most districts relative to the ratio in GE13. How do we explain this counter-intuitive outcome? Theoretically, the opposition-split hypothesis rests on the assumption that third-party challengers take votes *only* from the established opposition party in a given district. We argue that the pronounced regionalism of Malaysia's politics significantly mitigated the impact of opposition fragmentation, as the third party was a strong factor in only one of the four distinct electoral arenas. Moreover, the mutual focus on a conservative Islamist agenda and policy coordination left UMNO and PAS largely competing over the same pool of votes, making PAS a suboptimal agent for UMNO's attempts to divide opposition votes. In short, it is likely that PAS took votes from UMNO as well as from PH.

There are no available tests to determine with precision who third-party voters would have supported in the absence of a third-party option. Consequently, we conduct a series of simulations that estimate the seat share of counterfactual elections without three-corner contests under a range of potential distributions. This exercise yields two conclusions. First, three-corner fights are almost certainly not responsible for the BN's defeat, though it is conceivable that they hurt the BN more than they helped them. Second, if a significant share of PAS votes went to the BN – as they presumably would have under a more formal Malay-unity coalition – the BN would have secured a sufficient number of seats to retain power. While the dramatic reshuffling of Malaysia's political landscape limits the utility of making projections, the existence of this pathway to power in GE14 is likely to inform strategic decisions within UMNO and PAS.

The distribution of votes between the three main challengers in GE14 offers insights into the likely nature of post-transition politics in Malaysia. The BN already abandoned pretences of representing ethnic Chinese and Indian interests in the run-up to GE14, and PAS made clear its unwillingness to work together with any party that maintains ties to the largely Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP). As such, the clearest viable strategy for both is to amplify the salience of ethno-religious fault lines in a bid to reclaim the Malay vote, which comprises over half of the electorate and supported the BN and PAS at significantly higher rates than PH in GE14. Even if the presence of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) – an UMNO-clone party created by an elite split within UMNO – in

the PH coalition mitigates the impact of this strategy, ethno-religious agitation by UMNO and PAS will complicate the internal politics of the explicitly multiracial PH coalition.

Our findings also contribute to the extensive literature on opposition coordination and fragmentation under electoral authoritarianism. Specifically, they underscore the importance of local context – especially local party structures – since the impact of opposition fragmentation was constrained by the heavily regionalised nature of party support in Malaysia, which limited PAS's ability to draw votes from other opposition parties. They also question the generally unstated assumption of the coordination thesis, namely that the third party takes votes only from the other challenger and not the ruling party. As such, the popularity of the incumbent relative to its local opponents may matter more than the degree of coordination between the opposition. Furthermore, we note the importance of intervening factors – for example the elite split within UMNO that led to the creation of Bersatu – which likewise mitigated the impact of opposition fragmentation. In short, while the BN's historic loss in GE14 does not upend the conventional wisdom around opposition coordination, it does significantly refine it.

2 Electoral Authoritarianism and Opposition Coordination

A large body of literature examines the conditions that lead to the "stunning" losses of hegemonic regimes, including in Africa (van de Walle 2006), Eastern Europe (Bunce and Wolchik 2010), India (Ziegfeld and Tudor 2017), and Mexico (Magaloni 2006). The explanations offered for these reversals include foreign influence (Donno 2013), miscalculation (Huntington 1993), and opposition learning (Lindberg 2006). The most dominant one, however, is opposition coordination (Howard and Roessler 2006; van de Walle 2006; Donno 2013; Ziegfeld and Tudor 2017). As Bunce and Wolchik note: "The electoral factor that has received the most attention […] is the unity of the opposition" (2010: 50). The converse is also true: if opposition coalition-building increases the probability of opposition success, the *fragmentation* of the opposition may serve to stabilise the regime (Magaloni 2006).

Howard and Roessler (2006) lay out the simple logic underlying the importance of opposition coalitions. First and most obviously, a fragmented opposition divides votes – which in a majoritarian electoral system

bolsters the chances of the largest party. Second, coalitions prevent opposition parties from campaigning against each other and allow them to train their fire on the incumbent. Third, opposition coalitions may decrease repression because the incumbent fears they might win and afterwards exact revenge. Finally, coordination may mobilise citizens to vote by increasing the perceived likelihood of an opposition victory.

Cross-national evidence supports these views (Howard and Roessler 2006; Donno 2013). However, in attempting to understand whether Malaysia is different, it is important to note that the coalition argument rests on an unstated assumption, specifically that no member of the coalition could take away votes from the *incumbent*. Consider the following scenario with three parties, where one is the incumbent: The assumption of the opposition-split model is that the incumbent's vote share is fixed, and that the two opposition parties compete over the remaining share at the district level. Therefore, by participating in a coalition – in which one of the opposition parties agrees not to compete in a given district – the remaining opposition party captures the entire available opposition vote. The first two columns in Table 1 show these scenarios. In Scenario 1, the opposition coordinates and wins, while in Scenario 2 the opposition does not coordinate and splits the anti-incumbent vote. Consistent with the theory, the incumbent wins when the opposition does not coordinate, and loses when it does.

What happens, however, if the assumption that the two opposition parties steal votes only from each other is relaxed? Scenario 3 assumes a partial split. In this case, the opposition does not coordinate and all three parties run in all districts. Opposition party B now receives 20 per cent in each district. However, instead of all third-party votes coming from opposition party A, only 10 per cent of the district's votes are taken from them and 10 per cent from the incumbent. Why might this happen? Imagine a district where a large number of voters only weakly prefer the incumbent to the available opposition party, which perhaps represents a different ethnic group. The addition of a new opposition party may result in some weak incumbent supporters defecting to the new opposition option. Furthermore, only a small number of those that voted for opposition party A are tempted to vote for the new opposition. In a case like this, the party split does not help the incumbent.

A final option relates to elite splits, which produce new challenger parties comprised of defectors from the hegemonic party (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Reuter and Gandhi 2010). Mexico's PRI faced this problem when disgruntled losers in the fight for the presidential nomination would form independent challenger parties. This option might

produce Scenario 4, where some members of the incumbent join opposition party A.

If we assume that all previous supporters of opposition party A continue to support that party, and 15 per cent of voters from the hegemonic party join them, opposition party A wins even when they do not coordinate with opposition party B. In fact, even if all of opposition party B's votes come from opposition party A, the 15 per cent swing from the incumbent to opposition party A still allows the latter to win – even without a coalition.

Table 1. Hypothetical Effect of Three-Corner Fights under Different Scenarios

	Scenario 1 (Baseline)			**Scenario 2 (Opposition Split)**		
	All votes for Party A/B transferred to remaining Opposition Party			*Opposition divided and all votes for Party A/B subtracted from Party A/B*		
	Incum	Opp A	Opp B	Incum	Opp A	Opp B
District 1	48	52		48	32	20
				(0)	(-20)	(+20)
District 2	44		56	44	20	36
				(0)	(+20)	(-20)
District 3	48	52		48	32	20
				(0)	(-20)	(+20)
Seats	0	3		3	0	0
Result	AB Coalition Winner			Incumbent Winner		

	Scenario 3 (Partial Split)			**Scenario 4 (Elite Split)**		
	1/2 of votes for the third party come from incumbent, 1/2 from other opposition			*Opposition divided and all votes for Party A/B subtracted from Party A/B, but Opposition A receives 15 percentage points from incumbent*		
	Incum	Opp A	Opp B	Incum	Opp A	Opp B
District 1	38	42	20	33	47	20
	(-10)	(-10)	(+20)	(-15)	(15-20=-5)	(+20)
District 2	34	20	46	29	35	36
	(-10)	(+20)	(-10)	(-15)	(15+20=35)	(-20)
District 3	38	42	20	33	47	20
	(-10)	(-10)	(+20)	(-15)	(15-20=-5)	(+20)
Seats	0	2	1	0	2	1
Result	Opposition A Winner			Opposition A Winner		

Note: The numbers in parentheses are the differences in district vote percentages between the baseline (opposition coordination) and the new outcome.

This suggests several possibilities for the effect of three-corner fights in Malaysia's GE14. The first is the *opposition-split hypothesis*, where the three-corner fight worked as anticipated and increased the BN's seat share. The BN's defeat, in this scenario, is a result of it simply not drawing enough votes to be competitive, *despite* benefiting from opposition fragmentation. The second is the *partial-split hypothesis*, where the three-corner fight split votes from the incumbent and the opposition; in this instance, the three-corner fights may have *hurt* the BN under certain vote distributions. While not mutually exclusive to the first two, the *elite-split hypothesis* proffers that the creation of PH component party Bersatu from former UMNO elites mitigated the impact of three-corner fights. This is because some voters supported the coalition built around the "alternative" manifestation of UMNO, regardless of which parties were contesting in a given district. Finally, it is clear that the heavily regionalised nature of Malaysian politics also mitigated the effect of three-corner fights. Specifically, the *opposition-split hypothesis* assumes that parties are able to draw support across all districts. When support bases are strongly localised, however, votes will be split only among those parties that are locally competitive, regardless of coalition alignments. In the Malaysian case, this greatly limited the impact of third-party challenges in areas beyond their respective strongholds.

3 Cooperation between Opposition Parties in Malaysia

The effect of opposition coordination also depends heavily on the electoral system. Malaysia uses a Westminster-style parliamentary system with first-past-the-post rules in single-member districts. It was a quintessential competitive authoritarian system under large stretches of BN rule (Levitsky and Way 2010), with the BN using its control of Malaysia's powerful state to manipulate the electoral process in ways that reinforced its political dominance.[2] These far-reaching advantages, buttressed by performance legitimacy from Malaysia's strong developmental record, allowed the BN to consistently win elections.[3] UMNO and its coalition partners, in fact, secured at least a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority in 10 of the first 13 elections, and seemed at no point in serious danger of losing power. Yet while these elections did not meet widely accepted standards of fairness – at least from the 1970s onwards – they were generally free to be

2 See Gomez (2016), Slater (2012), and Ostwald (2017a) for discussions of how UMNO maintained electoral dominance.

3 The UMNO-led coalition was known as the Alliance prior to 1973.

contested by opposition parties (Lim and Ong 2006). Indeed, Malaysia's various opposition parties won seats in every general election and consistently managed to capture state governments.[4]

As the nature of opposition parties shapes and constrains coordination possibilities, we briefly review the major players. Opposition politics in Malaysia have received significant academic attention (Jesudason 1996; Ufen 2009; Dettman 2018; Ong 2018). For GE14, PAS played the role of third-party challenger. Founded in 1951 by a faction of Muslim clerics within UMNO, PAS initially focused on ethnonationalist rather than Islamist objectives. It then briefly joined the BN in 1974 after the May 13th race riots of 1969, though friction with UMNO caused it to resume an oppositional role outside of the coalition in 1978 (Noor 2014). Internal conflict in the early 1980s saw the *ulama* faction of Muslim clerics seize control, shifting the orientation of the party towards a more explicitly Islamist agenda.

PAS draws support primarily from rural Malays, who are constitutionally defined as Muslim.[5] As such, its base has similar characteristics to that of UMNO. The contest over the vital rural Malay vote precipitated what has been somewhat problematically described as an "Islamisation race" between PAS and UMNO from the 1980s onwards (Liow 2004), in which both sides have fought to portray themselves as the true defenders of Islam. This has substantially amplified the position of Islam in Malaysian politics (Mohamed Nawab 2017). Despite conceiving of itself as a pan-Malaysian party with widespread networks throughout the peninsula, PAS's historic strength has been concentrated in the north-eastern Malay-dominant states of Kelantan and Terengganu, with some penetration into Kedah and Perak; this historic stronghold significantly impacted the effect of three-corner contests in GE14, as argued in the following section.

The DAP was founded in 1966 as the Malaysian successor to the People's Action Party of Singapore. It effectively captured the progressive, urban, and predominantly ethnic Chinese constituency that previously supported Malaya's socialist and communist movements through the professed objectives of establishing a democratic and socialist Malaysia free of religious or racial hierarchies. While efforts to cultivate a more multi-

4 Malaysia has a federal structure with power nominally distributed between federal, state, and local government tiers (Harding and Chin 2014). Decades of centralisation, however, have largely hollowed out the competences of subnational tiers, thereby increasingly concentrating power at the federal level (Loh 2010; Ostwald 2017b).

5 See Moustafa (2018) for a discussion of the legal foundations of Islam in Malaysia.

ethnic visage have brought some success, the Chinese association nevertheless remains pronounced (Weiss 2015). It has had considerable success in building an urban base in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly as the growing centrality of Islam and Malay privilege in the BN's agenda weakened the position of BN component parties Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Gerakan, who likewise have a historical Chinese and urban association. Fundamental differences in ideological orientation between PAS and the DAP prevented serious collaboration prior to the late 1990s. As Liow writes:

> Such was the religious conviction behind PAS politics, [that] the Islamic party was on many occasions prepared to forgo potentially fruitful cooperation with secular opposition allies in order to maintain fidelity to its declared objectives. (2004: 196)

In its fragmented state, the opposition could muster only symbolically important seat wins, but was unable to seriously challenge the BN for control of the state. This changed with the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the subsequent leadership dispute within UMNO. Against the backdrop of economic turmoil, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's sacking of his popular deputy Anwar Ibrahim focused political discontent with the BN's leadership and gave rise to the *Reformasi* movement. This brought together political movements and non-governmental organisations that previously had little contact, and led to mass protests of an unprecedented scale (Welsh 2004; Weiss 2006). Following Anwar's arrest, his wife Wan Azizah formed and led the Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN), which would later merge with the Parti Rakyat Malaysia to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). With the predominantly Malay PKN as anchor and bridge, the DAP and PAS united to form the Barisan Alternatif (BA) opposition coalition. The BA attacked the BN's vulnerabilities on issues like institutional decay and abuse of power, while largely avoiding the potentially divisive issues of Islam and *Bumiputera* privilege that had hitherto inhibited opposition coordination. While the coordination was too new to have a significant impact on the 1999 election (GE10), its potential to focus anti-BN sentiments was evident.

The post-election period saw the BN severely clamp down on the opposition's operating space by prohibiting rallies, restricting several opposition publications, and imprisoning key opposition leaders – notably Anwar, on a nine-year term for the dubious charge of sodomy. The meddling had its desired effect: with strains between PAS and the DAP increasing and a fragmented PKR unable to bridge divisions, coordination in the run-up to GE11 was poor. Consequently, the BN rebounded with

one of its strongest electoral performances, catalysing the BA's dissolution shortly thereafter.

Anwar's unexpected release in late 2004 revitalised the opposition and facilitated renewed coordination. Under his leadership the factionalism that hampered PKN and PKR was contained, and PAS and the DAP were brought back to the table. The informal PKR–PAS–DAP coalition, which coordinated campaign efforts and candidate selection to ensure competitive two-corner fights against the BN, managed an unprecedented electoral breakthrough in 2008 (GE12): for the first time since the violence-shrouded 1969 election, the BN was denied its customary two-thirds supermajority and was forced to concede 5 of the 13 state governments. Moreover, the BN failed to win the symbolically important popular vote in Peninsular Malaysia; its junior partners – MCA, MIC, and Gerakan – were all but decimated. While the BN retained power due to far-reaching manipulations of the electoral system, the era of its undisputed hegemony was over (Maznah 2008; Ufen 2008; Pepinsky 2009). Shortly after the election, PKR, PAS, and the DAP formalised their coalition as the aforementioned PR.

3.1 Cooperation between GE13 and GE14

The momentum of GE12 sustained opposition coordination leading up to and during GE13, where PR managed another unprecedented breakthrough by winning the popular vote by a 4 per cent margin. Severe malapportionment, however, still left the opposition with a 20 per cent seat deficit (Wong 2018; Lee 2015; Ostwald 2013). The realisation that a turnover of power remained elusive even with a significant popular vote victory deflated opposition politics (Welsh 2013). Against this backdrop familiar tensions between PAS and the DAP reappeared and ultimately fragmented the coalition.

Several factors contributed to the split. The death of PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz in early 2015 removed a key bridging figure between PAS and its coalition partners. Shortly thereafter a factional split within PAS saw the conservative *ulama* wing secure control, sidelining the pro-PR progressives and professionals, who then left the party to form the Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). This was the final blow for PR, which was summarily declared dead several days later.

With PAS charting its own course, the remaining PR members, together with Amanah and Sabah-based Warisan, coalesced as the aforementioned PH in late 2015. The absence of PAS was widely seen as a weakness, however, as the progressive nature of PKR and Amanah were ill-suited to

allaying fears among conservative rural Malay voters that an opposition victory meant the erosion of Muslim and Malay primacy. In short, without PAS in the opposition coalition, the opposition lacked the guarantor of continuity necessary to pry rural Malay votes away from UMNO.

UMNO, however, faced growing vulnerabilities of its own. Prime Minister Najib Razak made international headlines for his involvement in the massive 1MDB financial scandal, and faced criticisms for mismanagement of key institutions like FELDA and the unpopular goods and services tax (Faisal 2018). Challenges from within UMNO were met with purges of those whose loyalty Najib doubted, including deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Mahathir's son Mukhriz Mahathir. After much build-up, the 91-year-old Mahathir himself announced a return to politics with the aim of deposing Najib – leading, as noted, to the late-2016 creation of Bersatu, which drew in many of the purged UMNO elite. By March 2017 Bersatu was an official member of PH, with Mahathir taking the role of prime minister-designate.

Bersatu's addition to PH mitigated, we argue, the coalition's vulnerability among rural Malay voters. UMNO has long presented itself as the true defender of Islam and Malay primacy, while suggesting that an opposition government which contained the DAP would be hostile to those ends. Survey evidence suggests that such concerns resonated strongly with rural Malays, for whom communal interests remain a high priority (Merdeka 2010). PAS's presence in PR provided an effective counter against this messaging, as its Islamist credentials were evident. With the addition of Bersatu, PH gained a party whose members had established their political careers within UMNO – often by attacking the progressive agenda that UMNO warned of in the run-up to GE14. In short, a government led by a Malay-only party comprised of former UMNO members offered conservative Malay voters a sense of continuity and some assurance that a turnover of power would not jeopardise their position in society and politics. Seen in this light, the formation of Bersatu can be considered an *elite split*, which theory suggests undermines autocratic rule, and may thus provide a counterweight to the effect of opposition fragmentation.

3.2 UMNO and Opposition Fragmentation

The opposition's fragmentation and the subsequent decision by PAS to contest GE14 as a third party were not simply a return to a pre-*Reformasi* equilibrium. Rather, we argue, they reflect deliberate efforts by UMNO to weaken challenges against it by following textbook political science theory.

These efforts take the form of leveraging the historic tension between PAS and the DAP over the role of Islam in Malaysian politics in order to fragment the PR coalition, as well as providing PAS with support to run as a third party in GE14 in areas beyond its base, under the assumption that PAS would divide the anti-BN vote.

UMNO made consistent efforts to fragment coordination between PAS and the DAP throughout the period of their collaboration. Examples abound. Following GE12, UMNO suggested the possibility of a Malay-unity state government in Selangor – thereby challenging the cohesion of the fledgling PR coalition. While several senior PAS figures appeared receptive to this arrangement, it was ultimately declined following strong objections by other members, notably, Nik Aziz (*Malaysiakini* 2008; *The Star Online* 2013a). In other instances, conservative figures within PAS – including Hasan Ali and Nasharudin Mat Isa – echoed UMNO talking points while criticising their party's collaboration with the DAP (*The Star Online* 2011; *Malaysiakini* 2011). Following PAS's loss of Kedah and failure to capture Terengganu, its *ulama* council chief Harun Taib praised UMNO for its success with Malay voters, while urging the party to reconsider its political cooperation with the DAP and PKR (*The Star Online* 2013b; *Malaysiakini* 2013).

The 2015 death of Nik Aziz not only removed a key bridging figure in the opposition coalition, but also opened the door to divisive policy initiatives that his moderate faction had effectively stifled previously. Just one month after his death, the PAS-controlled Kelantan state assembly amended the Shariah criminal code to pave the way for the implementation of Shariah law. This was passed together with unanimous support from UMNO lawmakers (*The Straits Times* 2015). Soon thereafter PAS president Hadi Awang served notice that he would table a private member's bill – known as Act 355 – in federal parliament, which sought to remove remaining obstacles to the implementation of the Shariah criminal code. This likewise required active support from the UMNO-controlled parliament, which recognised that the issue of Islamic law was a red line for many DAP members and supporters (*The Malay Mail* 2016). Najib and Hadi amplified the visibility of the issue by attending events together and voicing support for PAS–UMNO cooperation, with clear reference to Islamic law. As the issue dominated headlines, the PAS–DAP partnership grew increasingly untenable. While no single factor can be isolated as the cause of PR's breakup, the wedge of political Islam played a major role and was almost certainly fostered – if not outright orchestrated – by UMNO.

There are ample indications of coordination between PAS and UMNO in GE14, including several strong statements by respective party elites. Hadi, for example, expressed a desire to see PAS govern the states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perak, Selangor, and Terengganu, while leaving the rest for UMNO (*Free Malaysia Today* 2017). There are also compelling indications that UMNO provided financial support for PAS to contest the election beyond its heartland, without which the costs of deposits and campaigning in 160 districts – remarkably, more than UMNO itself contested – would likely have been prohibitive (*Malaysiakini* 2018a, 2018b). The *Sarawak Report* alleged that top PAS leaders had received millions in cash from UMNO to support their election bid. In a recording that appeared to defend the practice, then PAS youth leader Nik Abduh spoke openly about UMNO support:

> During the Sarawak Election, [when PAS] people did cooperate with UMNO to defeat DAP. It was apparent that Tok Guru Nik Aziz took UMNO's money, Tok Guru Haji Hadi took UMNO's money, I took UMNO's money, everyone took UMNO's money. Among the reasons why we succeeded was with UMNO's help. UMNO helped us to achieve victory. (*Sarawak Report* 2018)

Alongside the potential financial support, there were also widespread allegations of informal candidate-level coordination between PAS and UMNO in some PAS strongholds, as PAS appeared to field relatively weak federal-level candidates in exchange for UMNO running weaker candidates at the state level. UMNO also appeared to make several policy concessions favourable to PAS's agenda (*Malaysiakini* 2018c). To be clear, relations between the parties remained adversarial at times and in certain places. There is little question, however, that UMNO worked with PAS to achieve mutually desirable ends, many of which entailed pulling votes away from PH parties.

4 Empirical Assessment of Three-Corner Contests

The previous sections demonstrate three points. First, the existing literature strongly suggests that opposition fragmentation bolsters the probability of incumbent victory. Second, the BN seemed aware of this and actively fomented divisions between PAS and its opposition partners. Third, it achieved its goal of splitting the opposition in GE14, creating three-cornered fights that were expected to divide the anti-incumbent vote and

return the BN to power. Despite this successful manoeuvring, the BN was dealt a devastating defeat in GE14.

Table 2 examines aggregated electoral results from GE13 and GE14, which provide three initial observations that help make sense of the outcome. First, the BN suffered a major decline in vote share, lagging behind PH by nearly 15 per cent – relative to only 4 per cent in GE13. Second, PAS secured a substantial portion of votes as a third party in GE14, capturing just over half of the BN's vote totals. This is a remarkable result for what is a niche party next to the BN's ostensibly grand coalition structure. Lastly, both PH and the BN received a seat share above their vote share in GE14. While PH's seat bonus is expected due to the tendency of majoritarian systems to produce manufactured majorities, the BN's seat bonus – despite the poor popular vote performance – suggests that electoral boundaries continued to play in its favour (Oliver and Ostwald 2018).

Table 2. Results of GE14 and GE13

Election	Coalition	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Per Cent Seats	Popular Vote
GE14	Barisan Nasional	222	79	36%	34%
	Pakatan Harapan	221	121	55%	49%
	PAS	158	18	8%	17%
GE13	Barisan Nasional	222	133	60%	47%
	Pakatan Rakyat	222	89	40%	51%

These aggregate outcomes, however, obscure substantial regional variation in coalition/party strengths and competition dynamics. To clarify the role of opposition fragmentation, we suggest conceiving of GE14 as four distinct *regional* contests. As previously discussed, if specific opposition parties are unable to secure substantial electoral support outside their strongholds, then the impact of three-corner fights may be mitigated.

Table 3 displays the number of seats contested, seats won, proportion of seats won, and popular vote in each of the four regional arenas in GE14. The proportion of seats won in GE13 is also included for context. The first arena comprises the 57 districts of East Malaysia, which have a distinct political history and dynamic (Oh 2013; Chin 2014). These were long dominated by the BN, justifying the characterisation of Sabah and Sarawak as the BN's "fixed deposit" states. The second comprises the 22 districts of the north-eastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu, which are almost exclusively Malay and have been home to a pronounced PAS presence from the late 1950s onwards. The third comprises the 59 peninsular seats where ethnic Chinese and Indians make up more than 40 per cent of the

electorate. While the BN has historically been competitive in these largely urban and semi-urban districts, they were all but conceded to the opposition when the BN shifted to a more explicitly Malay-centric platform following GE13. The fourth arena comprises the 84 remaining peninsular districts in which Malays make up at least 60 per cent of the electorate. These are UMNO's historical strongholds, as reflected by the BN winning over 80 per cent of these districts in GE13.

Table 3. Four Electoral Arenas in Malaysia

		GE14				GE13
		Seats Contested	Seats Won	Prop Won	Vote Share	Prop Seats Won
1. East Malaysia	BN	57	30	.53	.40	.86
- 57 seats	PH/PR	56	24	.43	.45	.14
- 2.4M voters	PAS	14	-	-	.01	
2. North East	BN	22	7	.32	.39	.41
- 22 seats	PH/PR	22	-	-	.11	.59
- 1.8M voters	PAS	22	15	.68	.48	
3. Minority	BN	59	3	.05	.23	.29
- 59 seats	PH/PR	58	55	.95	.67	.71
- 5.2M voters	PAS	40	-	-	.09	
4. Remainder	BN	84	39	.46	.37	.81
- 84 seats	PH/PR	84	42	.50	.41	.19
- 5.5M voters	PAS	81	3	.04	.20	

Note: Seats refers to Malaysia's 222 lower house *Dewan Rakyat* seats.

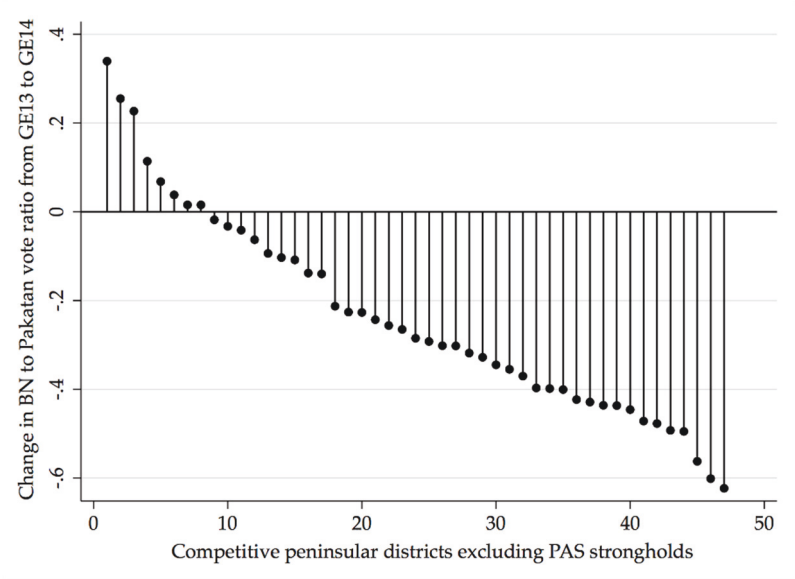
PAS's relevance varies substantially across these arenas in GE14. It was a non-factor in East Malaysia, contesting only one-quarter of the seats and receiving just 1 per cent of the vote. In the north-eastern states, by contrast, PAS was dominant, winning over two-thirds of districts and denying PH any seats, thereby prompting discussions of a "green tsunami" in the Malay heartland (Saat 2018). For all intents and purposes, PH acted as the third-party challenger in this arena, but its anaemic vote share of just 11 per cent limited its impact. While PAS contested 40 of the 59 districts where ethnic Chinese and Indian voters comprise over 40 per cent of the electorate, it did not capture a single seat and drew less than 10 per cent of the vote, again limiting its relevance. Only in the remaining Malay-dominant seats of the peninsula was PAS potentially disruptive as a third-party contestant: while it won just 3 of these 84 seats, it secured 20 per cent of votes relative to 37 per cent for the BN and 41 per cent for PH.

Several conclusions are noteworthy. PAS was irrelevant as a third-party contestant in East Malaysia and largely irrelevant in the ethnically mixed and minority-dominant peninsular districts. PH, by contrast, was too weak in the north-eastern states to meaningfully split the anti-BN vote, which undermined the aforementioned BN strategy of securing more federal seats in exchange for running weak candidates at the state level. In short, despite a large majority of districts being contested by three parties, the relative weakness of the third-party challenger in most districts limited the relevance of opposition fragmentation. Only in a subset of the Malay-dominant peninsular seats did PAS capture enough of the vote to be a decisive factor in an otherwise competitive fight between the BN and PH.

How did the three-corner fights affect the contest between the BN and PH in those districts? Under the *opposition-split hypothesis*, a second anti-incumbent option would divide anti-incumbent votes, thereby lowering the BN's district-level victory threshold. This would lead to an improvement in the BN-to-Pakatan vote ratio. For the sake of illustration, imagine a district with 5 pro-incumbent and 5 anti-incumbent voters. The addition of a second anti-incumbent option might draw 2 of the anti-incumbent votes, increasing the BN's vote ratio from 1:1 to 1.67:1, thereby securing it the district. By contrast, the *partial-split hypothesis* states that the third-party vote may come from both sides or from the BN alone. If the 2 third-party votes came from the BN and PH, the vote count would be 2/4/4 respectively, retaining the 1:1 ratio between the BN and PH and not substantially affecting the outcome. If the 2 third-party votes, however, would have supported the BN in a two-cornered contest, the BN to PH vote ratio would decline to 0.6:1.

Comparing the change in BN-to-Pakatan vote ratios in competitive districts between GE13 and GE14 provides initial insights into the efficacy of the BN's opposition fragmentation strategy. The logic is simple. The BN hoped to retain its core voters in competitive districts and – following the *opposition-split hypothesis* – fragment the anti-incumbent vote. This would result in a uniform improvement of BN-to-Pakatan vote ratios. Figure 1 illustrates the actual change in vote ratios in competitive districts, defined here as those decided by less than 10 per cent in GE13. Districts in which PAS secured a greater vote share than the PH party are excluded due to the unique political dynamics in PAS strongholds. East Malaysian districts are likewise excluded due to the general irrelevance of the third-party challenger there. A positive value indicates an improvement in the BN-to-Pakatan (Rakyat/Harapan) ratio, while a negative value indicates a decline.

Figure 1. Changes in BN-to-Pakatan Vote Ratios in Competitive Districts



If the BN's strategy of retaining pro-incumbent votes while splitting anti-incumbent votes was successful, we would see a uniform improvement in the BN-to-Pakatan vote ratio between GE13 and GE14. Instead, its vote ratio *declined* in 39 of the 47 districts. Losing these competitive districts essentially sealed the BN's fate in GE14.

Two potential factors contribute to this outcome. First, voters who supported the BN in GE13 may have defected to PH in GE14. Given that a large majority of these 47 competitive districts are in Malay-dominant areas where UMNO is traditionally strong, the *elite-split hypothesis* – which states that UMNO voters might support PH due to the sense of relative continuity that Mahathir's leadership provided – is a compelling explanation. Second, it is possible that UMNO was mistaken in assuming that PAS would only split the anti-incumbent votes; indeed, some of the PAS votes in GE14 may have gone to the BN rather than PH in the absence of a third-party option.

We can assume that both of these factors contributed to the decline in the BN's vote ratio. There is no reliable method for systematically disaggregating their relative influence using available data, and even survey data is subject to potentially distorting bias. It is not possible, in short, to state with certainty who a third-party voter would have supported if GE14

only had two-cornered contests. In lieu of that, we present several scenarios in which the third-party votes are redistributed between competitors in a *counterfactual* GE14 with only two-corner fights. This allows us to estimate the hypothetical seat shares under different assumptions, thereby clarifying the implications of opposition fragmentation.

There are two broad scenarios. In the first, all districts are contested between the BN and PH, so votes for PAS and other third-parties are redistributed between the two dominant coalitions. As this exercise is necessarily speculative, Table 4 shows the hypothetical seat distribution following a range of feasible distributions – specifically, 100 per cent, 75 per cent, 50 per cent, or 25 per cent of PAS votes going to PH, with the balance going to the BN. Under the *opposition-split hypothesis* – where all votes for PH and PAS are anti-incumbent votes that would have gone to PH in a two-corner fight – PH captures 189 seats, thus completely decimating the BN. Note that this is essentially a recreation of PR, in which all sincere PAS supporters vote against the BN. The other distributions reflect some portion of PAS votes going to BN in a two-corner fight. As it is unrealistic to imagine an outcome where *all* PAS votes would have gone to the BN – given that some portion of PAS votes were clearly anti-Najib and anti-incumbent in nature – we do not show that outcome. It is noteworthy that the right end of the spectrum, in which most PAS voters would cast a ballot for the BN in a two-corner contest, approximates a Malay-unity-type coalition.

Table 4. Counterfactual Seat Shares (between the Two Dominant Coalitions). Based on Redistribution of PAS Votes to either PH or BN

Seats	100% PH	75% PH	50% PH	25% PH
PH	189	153	124	107
BN	33	69	98	115

In the second broad scenario, the two-party contests are between the two strongest coalitions/party in each district; meaning between the BN and PAS in the north-eastern states, and between the BN and PH everywhere else. Table 5 shows the hypothetical seat shares when the third-party votes from GE14 are redistributed in this manner. As before we do not show the unrealistic outcome in which 100 per cent of third-party votes go to the BN, as we believe at least some portion of that vote was firmly anti-incumbent.

Table 5. Counterfactual Seat Shares (between the Two Locally Strongest Contestants). Based on Redistribution of Third-Party Votes to the Largest Two Contestants in Each District

Seats	100% PH/PAS	75% PH/PAS	50% PH/PAS	25% PH/PAS
PH	168	146	123	107
BN	33	60	84	102
PAS	21	16	15	13

These simulations provide several insights on GE14 and the potential nature of Malaysian politics post-transition. First, they demonstrate that even if UMNO miscalculated and the three-corner contests hurt the BN more than it helped them – meaning a significant portion of votes that went to PAS would have gone to the BN in a two-corner contest – they were almost certainly not responsible for the BN's defeat. The only scenario in which the BN could have retained power in GE14 is under a Malay-unity government that secured a large majority of the PAS votes. While this is a credible scenario – indeed, UMNO and PAS have continued to signal close cooperation in the election's immediate aftermath – it is likely that Najib's personal unpopularity and Mahathir's strong resonance among Malays would have led many third-party voters to opt for a Mahathir-led government over one led by Najib, even if PAS and UMNO officially joined forces. In short, the *partial-split hypothesis* can confidently be eliminated as the *principal* cause of the BN's surprise defeat in GE14. By contrast, if UMNO's supposition that most voters were either pro- or anti-BN was true, then opposition fragmentation in fact saved the long-ruling coalition from an even more cataclysmic defeat.

Survey findings from immediately after the election allude to another key issue. Approximately 95 per cent of Chinese and three-quarters of Indians supported PH. The Malay vote, by contrast, was split far more equally, with approximately 25–30 per cent voting for PH, 35–40 per cent for the BN, and 30–33 per cent for PAS (*The Straits Times* 2018). In short, aside from the regional limitations of third-party appeal, there was a pronounced ethnic dimension as well: opposition fragmentation failed to divide the non-Malay vote in any meaningful way, but may have in fact been too effective at dividing the Malay vote.

The Malay dimension requires closer examination. PAS's exit from Pakatan, the split of its more progressive faction to Amanah, and the collaboration with UMNO on policy matters left PAS with an agenda that aligned more closely to UMNO's than to that of PH. Both agendas, in essence, courted the same Islamist-leaning, conservative Malay vote. It is likely that UMNO and PAS split this bloc, while PH pulled in Malay voters

that prioritised the economic issues which were the focus of its campaign. This underscores, perhaps, the fundamental flaw in the BN's strategy of dividing the anti-incumbent vote: while the Malay vote was indeed pivotal for deciding the election, PAS was far from the ideal party to execute the opposition fragmentation strategy.

5 Discussion

Dominant party regimes often attempt to fragment the opposition in order to reduce the threats to their power: assuming pro-incumbent supporters can be retained through party machinery and electoral manipulations, anti-incumbent voters can be divided between multiple opposition parties, lowering the threshold required to secure districts in majoritarian systems like Malaysia's. This did not play out in GE14. Frustrations with Najib's leadership, together with the appeal of the "same but different" option that a Mahathir-led opposition offered to voters who previously formed UMNO's base, led to widespread defections away from the BN. Simultaneously, PAS was an appealing third-party option for some whose Islamist orientation made them hesitant to support a coalition that contained the DAP, but who were also turned off by Najib's apparent abuse of power. Without that third-party option, some Islamist votes may have gone to the BN, suggesting that PAS was simply not the right party to execute UMNO's strategy. Regardless, the pronounced regionalism of Malaysian politics mitigated the effect of three-corner fights, as it is difficult for a single party to draw votes across the highly dissimilar electoral arenas.

What do these outcomes indicate for post-transition politics in Malaysia? The BN already all but conceded the peninsular non-Malay vote in GE14. Simultaneously, securing just 70 per cent of the votes that went to PAS would have been enough to win the election. This reality is likely to inform UMNO's choice between two basic paths forward: to pursue a more multi-ethnic and progressive agenda, or to double down on the Malay-first politics. With the former strategy, UMNO needs to beat the PH parties on an agenda that they have refined over the course of several election cycles. With the latter, there is a conceivable path to the resumption of power that does not require UMNO to redefine itself. In addition, agitating on ethno-religious issues challenges the stability of the new coalition, which has yet to reconcile fundamental differences over the role of Islam and *Bumiputera* privilege in the Malaysian state. There is a ready partner for this in PAS, for whom the conservative Islamist agenda promises ongoing relevance in historic strongholds; PAS's anaemic performance outside its

heartland in GE14 underscores its lack of appeal in more diverse areas, particularly following the departure of its progressive and professional wing.

The prospect of continued UMNO–PAS collaboration thus appears strong, despite its clear limitations and concerning normative implications. The Sungai Kandis by-election, held less than three months after GE14, is illustrative: PAS chose not field a candidate, thus allowing a two-cornered flight between the PH and UMNO candidates. PAS then urged its supporters to back UMNO, claiming that PH threatened Malay rights and the primacy of Islam, adopting the script straight from UMNO's narrative.

In terms of the broader electoral authoritarian regime literature, these conclusions suggest that the turnover of dominant party rule in Malaysia does not upend conventional wisdom about the importance of opposition coordination. Indeed, our simulations show that with greater coordination, the outcome could have been even more lopsided. Rather, the case illustrates the importance of local context, as the pronounced regionalism of Malaysian politics mitigated the effect of the opposition split while PAS's agenda was ill-suited to pull votes from the progressive PH coalition. The effects of three-corner contests were also undermined by another prominent theory in the democratisation literature: an *elite split* within UMNO allowed the grandmaster of Malaysian politics, Mahathir Mohamad, to offer assurances of continuity to the same Malay voters that PAS and UMNO courted, but in the form of a coalition that removed the deeply unpopular Najib Razak from power and offered a tantalising path forward. As such, Malaysia's GE14 provides the literature with a unique manifestation of two dominant theories of democratisation – even if it does not rewrite either of them.

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